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ABSTRACT

While studies by Stanley Milgram have shown that obedience to authority influences subjects' willingness to engage in behavior potentially harmful to others, Drout and Vandler (1992) found that observers consider an authority figure who harms or commands another person to harm someone more responsible and punishable than the obedient subordinate. Why does the authority figure command greater censure? Because the authority of the superior is often confounded with the expertise of the superior, the present study examined responses to an authority figure and to a subordinate in a fraternity setting, where there was minimal difference in expertise yet significant difference in authority. It was hypothesized that greater responsibility would be attributed to a fraternity president as executant (forcing a pledge to consume liquor) than to an obedient brother doing his bidding. Findings are that students viewed the president as having more authority and greater liability for harmdoing yet did not consider his behavior more culpable or punishable, holding the fraternity president and brother equally responsible for events and equally punishable. The relationship between authority and responsibility is diminished in the absence of expertise on the part of the authority figure. It is found that the issue of "responsibility" is highly complex and needs clarification in situations involving obedience. Contains 7 references. (MSF)

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When rites go wrong: Attributions of responsibility in a fraternity setting

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Studies by Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974), while highly controversial, have clearly shown that obedience to authority is a decisive factor in influencing subjects' willingness to engage in behavior that is potentially harmful to others. Previous research has shown that obedience to authority also influences observers' attributions of responsibility for harmdoing. Drout and Vander (1992) found that naive observers, untutored regarding the significance of Milgram's work, viewed an authority figure who carried out harmdoing, or commanded another person to carry out harmdoing, as more responsible and punishable than an obedient subordinate who executed harmdoing in response to orders. Questions remain, however, regarding the exact nature of the role played by the authority figure in such studies. What is it about the role of the authority figure that elicits greater censure? Two factors that are generally confounded are the authority of the superior and the expertise of the superior. In many situations authority figures inherently possess greater expertise, as both a cause and a result of their being in a position of authority. The present study was designed to examine responses to an authority figure and a subordinate in a situation in which there is minimal difference in

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expertise and yet significant difference in authority.

Kelman and Hamilton (1989) have argued that a formula for predicting responsibility attributions might look something like: "roles X deeds = responsibility" (p. 202). They point out that attributions of responsibility involve the application of differing criteria for varying role positions. We were interested in investigating some of the variations in roles that might be important. Media reports of current events involving fraternity hazings (Continelli, 1991; Liguori, 1991) resulting in the deaths of pledges lead us to examine obedience in a fraternity setting.

The present study involved a fraternity president and a fraternity brother who force-fed alcohol to a pledge, as part of fraternity hazing, resulting in the death of the pledge. Conditions included force-feeding by the brother under the command of the fraternity president, force-feeding by the fraternity president himself, and voluntary consumption of alcohol under the direction of the fraternity president which also resulted in a lethal overdose.

Independent variables of independent action v. obedience, on the part of the harmdoer, and voluntary consumption v. involuntary consumption, on the part of the victim, were examined for their impact upon attributions of responsibility, causal attributions, and assessments of appropriate forms of redress.

It was hypothesized that greater responsibility would be attributed to the authority figure in the role of executant (i.e. executing the task of force-feeding the pledge) than to the obedient brother in the role of executant. it was expected that

there would be less differentiation in responses to the authority figure and the obedient subordinate in the current study than in the previous work (Drout & Vander, 1992) mentioned above because of fewer differences in the roles being compared. The hazing scenario employed in the current study involved differences in level of authority that are accompanied by minimal differences in expertise. In contrast, the earlier study (Drout & Vander, 1992) examined observers' attributions of responsibility for the death of a victim in a Milgram-type scenario in which the victim, a heart patient, receives a lethal dose of electric shock. Comparisons will be made ot those findings.

It was expected that the 'agentic state' - proposed by Milgram (1974) as an explanation for subjects' willingness to do harm to another while under the command of an authority - would be likely to affect subjects under conditions that involve the presence of authority even in the absence of expertise. In addition, it was proposed that reactions to the authority figure/executant would be stronger than reactions to the authority figure in charge of rush when a pledge voluntarily consumed a lethal overdose.

Methods

Subjects were 88 students (54 females and 34 males) enrolled in Introductory Psychology at SUNY Fredonia participating voluntarily in research as one of several options for earning extra credit. Subjects ranged in age from 18 to 44, with the majority of subjects between 18 and 22 years of age. Subjects were brought into the lab in groups of 15-20. Each subjects was randomly assigned one scenario to read and evaluate individually.

Results

Results suggest that a fraternity president commanding a brother to engage in harmdoing toward another is not judged in the same way as an experimenter or scientist commanding a subject. While students responded to the Milgram-type scenario by holding the experimenter more responsible (53%) than the obedient teacher (29%) and viewing him as more punishable than the obedient teacher, students responding to the fraternity president and brother held them equally responsible for events (president: 33%; brother: 38%) and viewed them as equally punishable.

A significant T-test did indicate that students viewed the fraternity president as more liable (M=5.5) for events that occured than the obedient brother (M=5.20), T=-2.32, $p<.03$. This suggests that students did view the president as having authority, yet, they did not view his behavior as more culpable, blameworthy, or punishable.

A multivariate analysis of variance examining causal attributions suggested that subjects were more convinced that the obedient brother was acting out of concern for maintaining his relationship with the fraternity (M=6.00) than the fraternity president (M=3.88) and less out of enjoyment (M=2.32) than the president (M=4.14) (Multivariate F for condition = 6.45, $p<.01$; Univariate F for concern with fraternity = 22.21, $p<.01$; Univariate F for enjoyment = 31.64, $p<.01$).

Multivariate analysis of variance suggested that subjects differentiated between the conditions of voluntary and involuntary consumption, assigning different levels of responsibility and

recommending different levels of punishment in each case.

Discussion

In sum, subjects responding to the rush scenario viewed the authority figure, in the form of a fraternity president, as having greater liability for harmdoing than an obedient brother. However, subjects viewed the fraternity president and brother as equally responsible and punishable. Comparisons were made with previous work (Drout & Vander, 1992) involving a Milgram-type scenario. Observed differences in judgements of harmdoing in the presence of different types of authority figures is interpreted as evidence of a relationship between authority, expertise, and responsiblity. The relationship between authority and responsibility - observed to be quite powerful in the Milgram-type situations - is diminished in the absence of expertise on the part of the authority figure.

Alternative explanations of differences in students' responses to the hazing and Milgram scenarios might also involve the potential for closer identification with the fraternity brother and president in the hazing scenario than with the subjects or experimenter in the Milgram scenario and the closer proximity of the harmdoer and victim in the hazing scenario.

In addition, although subjects held the fraternity president less responsible for the outcome of voluntary overconsumption than for involuntary overconsumption, a significant amount of responsibility was attributed to the president even in the case of voluntary overconsumption. On the other hand, in the involuntary case subjects tended to recommend various forms of punishment, while in the voluntary case they were neutral or uncertain about

the appropriateness of any of the forms of punishment proposed.

As aptly noted by Miller (1986), "Clearly the issue of 'responsibility' is extremely complex and in need of clarification with respect to the obedience experiments" (p.237). And, we might add, in respect to situations involving obedience in general.

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